

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
BIOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON

FORSTER'S TERN IN THE DISTRICT OF
COLUMBIA.

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Forster's Tern (*Sterna forsteri*) has had a somewhat curious history in connection with the list of birds of the Washington region. In the latest list of birds of this area¹ Miss May T. Cooke lists two records: "One, August, 1859 (Spec. U. S. Nat. Mus.); one, summer, 1875 (*vide* P. L. Jouy)."

Examination of the register of specimens in the National Museum reveals an entry for this species in the characteristic handwriting of Professor S. F. Baird. It was recorded as No. 20922, the other items of the data being Washington, Aug., 1859, S. F. Baird. In the column "how obtained" is the note "50c." From this it appears that the specimen was purchased, probably either in the market or from a local gunner, and while there is no definite reason to doubt its local origin, neither is there any definite assurance that it was so taken. This specimen apparently was overlooked by Coues and Prentiss in both editions of their birds of the District of Columbia,² and by Professor Cooke in his two lists of birds of Washington.³ It was sent to Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, March 21, 1888.

The specimen credited to P. L. Jouy was recorded by him in 1876,⁴ as "obtained last summer [1875] on the Potomac, in the vicinity of Georgetown."

In view of this seeming rarity, it is remarkable that during the month of September and first half of October, 1928, this tern should be fairly common on the Potomac River, within the District limits. I am indebted to Mr. and Mrs. William J. Whiting and to Mr. W. H. Ball for their notes, which are here incorporated to complete the account of this occurrence.

¹Proc. Biol. Soc. Wash., vol. 34, Mar. 31, 1921, p. 5.

²Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution, 1862, pp. 399-421; also Bul. No. 26, U. S. Nat. Mus., 1883.

³Proc. Biol. Soc. Wash., vol. 21, pp. 107-118, April 11, 1908; also vol. 26, pp. 21-26, February 8, 1913.

⁴Notes on Forster's Tern, Field and Forest, vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 29-31, August, 1876.

Reports of the presence of these birds reached the Biological Survey about the middle of September, but it was not until the 27th that I was able to search for them. On that date, in company with Captain Moody Creighton, in charge of the Biological Survey patrol boat "Curlew," I examined all the mud banks and islands in the river from Hains Point to the site of the new Memorial Bridge. A few terns were seen and two were taken, both being examples of *Sterna hirundo*. Needless to say, my confidence in the report of *S. forsteri*, dropped to zero, and it was only upon the repeated insistence of Mr. Ball, that another trip was made on October 11. This time no common terns were seen, but 16 Forster's were under observation for two or three hours as they moved up and down a long mud bank on the Virginia side of the channel opposite East Potomac Park. Three specimens were collected, two being retained in the Biological Survey collections, while the third was placed in the collection of District birds in the National Museum.

The following additional dates serve to round out the history of this interesting case: Sept. 13, one seen from mud flat (Whiting); Sept. 23, one seen at Tidal Basin (Whiting); Sept. 24, two resting on mud flat (Whiting); Sept. 25, one at Tidal Basin (Ball); Oct. 1, fourteen, counted resting on mud flat (Whiting); Oct. 2, one at Hains Point (Ball); Oct. 6, three at Hains Point (Ball); Oct. 6, four, near Memorial Bridge, then passing to near Highway Bridge (Whiting); Oct. 9, thirty-seven counted resting on mud flat, eight flying near at same time (Whiting); Oct. 14, three resting on mud flat (Whiting); Oct. 14, three at Hains Point (Ball).

A fall field character that has not been adequately stressed by authors is the white crown with the rather broad blackish bar on the sides of the head, embracing the eyes. In *S. hirundo* the black cap is frequently imperfect at this season, but apparently the crown is never silvery white as in *forsteri*. These two species may, in fact, be more readily identified in the field in the fall, than in the spring. Of the three specimens obtained, two were adult, while the third was a bird of the year.

Forster's Tern is known to breed on islands off the coast of Virginia so it would seem that it should be of rather frequent occurrence in the Washington region.